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AUTHOR Porcher, L.
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INSTITUTION Council for Cultural Cooperation, Strasbourg (France).
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ABSTRACT

The Modern Languages Project group devoted to language teaching and learning with respect to migrants conducted its work against the background of the fundamental principles of the Council of Europe. The principles are the following: a learner-centered approach, learner autonomy, flexibility, communicative competence, and treating the learner as a person and as a social being. The action taken falls under five headings: (1) descriptive tools deriving from the threshold level approach; (2) information tools, that is, methodological experiments, needs analysis, and problems of migrant children; (3) pilot projects in three countries initially (Germany, France, and Sweden); (4) colloquies and meetings; (5) new pilot projects as a result of the colloquies; and (6) coordination with the Council of Europe's project on the educational and cultural development of migrants in Europe. Finally, avenues for future exploration are identified in the areas of learner autonomy, assessment, language and culture, teacher training, the education of children and adolescents, design and production of teaching/learning instruments, and coordination and cooperation. (AMH)

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"ACROSS THE THRESHOLD TOWARDS MULTILINGUAL EUROPE -
VIVRE LE MULTILINGUISME EUROPEEN"

(Strasbourg 23-26 February 1982)

TOWARDS COMMUNICATIVE AUTONOMY FOR MIGRANTS

by

L PORCHER

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Work on the language problems of migrant workers and their families formed a logical development of the activities of the Council of Europe Modern Languages Project. There were several fundamental and convergent reasons for this development. These were, not necessarily in any order of priorities, as follows:

- In present-day Europe, as represented in the Council, migration is a considerable, lasting phenomenon. It affects both the European countries themselves (including both immigration and emigration countries) and countries outside Europe from which they receive labour (eg North-West Africa, Pakistan, India, Black Africa).

- In this context, language problems arise with particular acuteness and in a variety of ways: contact, conflict and collaboration between languages (host language and native language), relationship between strictly linguistic phenomena and more broadly cultural phenomena; conditions governing the integration of a large population into a foreign society.

- Ethically and from the point of view of social policy, migrants represent a major challenge to all responsible citizens of our time. The extremely difficult (economic, social, psychological, that is to say everyday) situation in which migrants live clearly demands collective action; in other words, it is the duty of us all to change that situation.

- Methodologically, language learning by migrants throws up a number of specific questions: when they learn the foreign language, it is in a context where that language is a mother-tongue (which is not the case in virtually all other language learning), when they first learn or develop their skills in their mother-tongue, they do so in a situation where it is a foreign language. This twin paradox is the source of considerable methodological difficulties which demand special treatment and cannot be avoided.

Our Modern Languages Project cherishes the ambition of stating the problems of language teaching/learning in their full magnitude. This in itself meant that a particular effort had to be devoted to migration. At the same time, the project group intended to conduct this activity in keeping with the fundamental principles which have guided its work since the beginning, adapting them of course to the specific characteristics of the migrant population. Accordingly, action has been based on the following methods:

a. the learner-centred approach

In the case of migrant workers, such an approach is clearly of paramount importance. It is important to identify their needs and both to provide them with the means of analysing them and to help satisfy them.

b. learner autonomy

This is no doubt the central point for the target group with which we are concerned here. Exile virtually always entails heteronomy, further accentuated in the case of migrants by the very difficult conditions with which they usually have to cope. It is therefore crucially important to help them build a personal autonomy which will be both the source and the product of the learner's co-management of his own learning.

c. flexibility

For any given group of learners we have tried to give preference to methodologies, rather than ready-made methods, to approaches rather than finished products. For migrants as a specific group of learners, this is even more necessary than for any other group. In Europe, situations in this respect vary in the extreme - different origins, different languages, differences in prior ability, differences in objectives. It is clear that one single teaching tool would in these circumstances have no pedagogical relevance.

Let there be no mistake, however. There is no question whatever of abandoning the concrete, the practical, the requirements of everyday teaching in the field. We all know that that is where the fate of any serious teaching enterprise is primarily (but not solely) decided. Our ambition is therefore to produce teaching and learning instruments which can actually be put to use in everyday circumstances. Only the choice must clearly be in favour of plurality and diversity. Centring on the learner demands such an approach: anything else is dogmatism.

d. communicative competence

For migrant workers, this is in the strictest sense of the term an absolute necessity, an imperative need. It is the only way in which they can fit into the host society without being either assimilated or confined to a ghetto.

e. the learner as a person and as a social being

Yet communicating is not enough. Making the instrumental dimension of the language being learned an end in itself is not without danger. It is admittedly indispensable in order to eradicate old attempts at exclusively "cultural" teaching of the language. But it is important, especially among migrant workers, to take into account the learner as a person and as a social being. Social and occupational integration are not the same thing, even if the one depends partly on the other. Personal identity is never foreign to the language. It must therefore be given its place. This raises the problem of the continuation of the learning of the language of origin in the host country (a really crucial question for migrant children), but the teaching of the host language must also take this dimension into account. In learning a foreign language, I influence my own personal identity: this operation is clearly and indisputably of decisive importance in the case of a migrant learner, whether child or adult.

I. Action undertaken

In the light of these principles and realities, the project group mounted a number of co-ordinated activities to mark out a specific methodological territory, whilst remaining coherent with the others.

1. Descriptive tools

We shall confine ourselves here to mentioning that this was among the group's concerns from a very early stage. Un niveau-seuil, which dates from 1976, specifically mentions "migrant workers and their families" among its target groups. Immediately afterwards, the adaptation of Un niveau-seuil

to school contexts also gave prominence to migrant children in French-speaking European countries. The same is true of Kontaktschwelle, which stresses this direction even more and highlights the common points and differences. At the same time, threshold levels were compiled in several languages of emigration countries: for Spanish first, which was begun in 1974, and then for Italian, now being published. Various projects, which have reached different stages, are now in progress along the same lines.

2. Information tools

These, too, are not entirely concerned with migration problems but are more general activities within which specific (and identifiable) attention has been given to migrant learners.

- The methodological compendium (a collection of experiments conducted in Europe on the basis of the principles laid down by the Council of Europe experts) edited by Daniel Coste, contains several sequences dealing with experiments with migrant learners;

- The needs analysis compendium (also a collection of concrete experiences), produced by René Richterich, gives considerable space to work concerning migrant adults and children;

- In "Reflections on language needs in the school" I myself gave full importance to the specific problems of migrant children in host country schools;

- On several occasions, in his various written contributions to the project (both proposals and conditions) John L M Trim, project adviser, has stressed the place of migrants in the group's work and the increased attention it should be given.

3. Pilot projects

Descriptions and information, necessary though they may be, cannot suffice. It is important, as soon as possible, to move on to concrete and systematic confrontation between theory and practice. For this reason, in this area, a number of pilot projects were launched, as had been done previously for other groups of learners. Apart from the field contact, this undertaking had the advantage of instituting actual co-operation between the Council of Europe and the national authorities in the various countries concerned.

To begin with, projects were started in three host countries, the Federal Republic of Germany, France and Sweden. From the outset, it was decided to institute flexible but regular communication between the three projects, both at team leader level and between the teams as such. This is not the place to go into detail on these three simultaneously independent and related schemes but it is important to describe their main lines:

a. the German team concentrated on identifying migrant workers' language needs and the co-ordinated design of teaching materials. Methodologies of analysis, objective results "photographing" a situation, the exposition of problems which seemed essential and suggestions for solving them, these were the main points of this project which has now been virtually completed;

b. the French team constructed a co-ordinated 3-tier scheme:

- the preparation of an "intermediate objective" (comparable to the "Waystage" produced by Jan van Ek and Louis Alexander for English), aimed specifically at migrant workers. This first part is complete and now being published;

- experiment in a firm in the Paris region with an "adult education" class, all migrants coming to learn French. The experiment was in two parts and carried out with an ordinary class, not formed specially for the purpose: firstly, continuous analysis of learners' needs by various methods; secondly, production of teaching materials for use with the class throughout its duration. Naturally, special attention was given to linking the two aspects together. The whole of this work has now been completed and a publication is in the process of completion.

- an analysis of what might be contained in a "preparatory" module intended to bring migrant workers up to a standard enabling them to follow courses leading to the CAP (basic vocational qualification) examinations which all include French tests as well as always being conducted in French throughout, both written and oral. This work, also completed, is in the process of being published.

c. The Swedish team, on the basis of a needs analysis, tackled the production of a Swedish threshold level for teaching Swedish as a foreign language to migrant workers in Sweden. This was the first time a description of objectives had been drawn up for a specific group of learners, that is to say based on the target group, rather than on the linguistic features of the language itself as a general instrument of communication. This work is now nearing completion.

4. Colloquies and meetings

These two activities have been closely linked with the pilot projects and aimed at co-ordinating work, exchanging experience and ideas for mutual evaluation, and development of new projects (which was in fact the case, as we shall see below):

a. Hässelby (Sweden) Colloquy

This colloquy took place in May 1979, after the experiments had been running for more than a year, and was attended by the three project teams, various national officials responsible for the three groups and

participants from outside the experiments well known for their competence in teaching migrants. This enabled an initial assessment to be made of the pilot projects and provided a first opportunity for joint discussion, a report on which has been published (written by Jan van Ek);

b. Stocktaking meetings

During the first half of 1981, the 3 teams visited each other on their home ground accompanied in each case by a general rapporteur from outside, Tom Jupp. This was a kind of mutual comparative evaluation, both external and internal, both formal evaluation and collective self-evaluation.

5. New pilot projects

In the meantime, particularly after the Hasseiby Colloquy, two further projects were launched:

- in the United Kingdom, an experiment on the identification of needs and the co-ordinated design of teaching materials for migrant workers of various nationalities in a working environment, focussing on learner autonomy;

- in France, an experiment involving the preparation of teaching materials for teaching French to migrant children, based on the adaptation of Un niveau-seuil for school contexts at the Metz CEFISEM (Training and Information Centre for the Education of Migrant Children).

These two projects, now nearing completion, also gave rise to stocktaking meetings of the type referred to above.

6. Co-ordination and prospects

Independently of the Modern Languages Project (Project No. 4), the Council for Cultural Co-operation launched a new project in 1980 on "The educational and cultural development of migrants in Europe" (Project No. 7), which was to last 5 years. Co-ordination was immediately established between the two project groups, facilitated by the fact that the author of this paper, a member of the Modern Languages Project Group, is also a member of the "Educational and cultural development of migrants" project, of which he has been elected chairman (and hence project adviser). It was agreed between the two groups that the problems of language teaching for migrants would be dealt with under Project No. 4 rather than under Project No. 7.

At the same time, when considering the need for a new Modern Languages Project after 1982, the official bodies concerned set only 3 priorities, which included teaching for migrants; this shows - were there any need to do so - the importance now everywhere attached to this task.

II. What future to build?

A great deal of ground has been covered and undeniable advances have been made in knowledge about the problems and the perception of some ways of solving them. However, much remains to be done, as everyone knew when they started. It is accordingly important to identify avenues to be explored first in the light of what we have learned so far.

1. Methodological coherence

Migrants are confronted with a need for learning two things - the host language and their own language. It is essential that there should be the least possible discordance between the methods used for the two. In everyday practice, this principle is by no means always adhered to. In particular, careful attention should be given to the specific problems raised by the teaching of the migrants' own language in the host country.

2. Autonomy

Little research has been done into the significance and method of implementation of autonomous learning in the case of migrant workers and their children. Theoretical work closely linked to a small number of pilot experiments would be most useful in this area.

3. Assessment

This is, of course, a very vexed question. Despite the number of specialists in assessment, it is no exaggeration to say that at the moment in the field of modern languages our appetite has merely been whetted. This applies particularly to teaching for migrants, especially insofar as no one is yet capable of constructing rigorously culture-free tests; yet there is every indication that migrant learners find themselves in a cultural limbo that places them at a constant and serious disadvantage.

4. Language and culture

In recent years, there has been growing awareness that there can be no good language teaching (that is to say efficient, useful, learner-centred teaching) if the cultural dimensions are neglected (ie those which are present in the language itself and those which constitute the fundamental identity of the learner). Now only a few blind technocrats still refuse to believe this, because they have a vested interest in doing so. The relationship between language and culture accordingly needs to be clearly elucidated and practical conclusions drawn from this analysis from the didactic point of view, particularly by adapting methodologies to the cultural components of the learners and producing instruments capable of taking into account the cultural aspects of any practical language teaching.

5. The training of teachers and adult educators

We shall not dwell on this point, though it is of absolutely crucial importance. However, a great deal of work has already been done on this topic and there is reason to think that everyone now realises that no decisive change will occur in language teaching unless the training of teachers and adult educators is reformed. Special mention should be

made of the considerable work carried out by a Council of Europe group presided over by Mrs Micheline Rey von Allmen on the training of teachers responsible for teaching migrant children in Europe. The situation seems less favourable as regards the training of adult educators, which is at present very much neglected.

6. Children and adolescents

This is where the most urgent effort is required. It is clear that attacking the problem at the roots (that is to say in the nursery school) and by making an all-out effort (which is possible henceforward in Europe, now 100% scholarised) can help to solve certain major language problems among migrant communities. In particular, this would provide a foundation for genuine inter-culturalism, the only pedagogical and political option effectively enabling everyone to build their own identity and their own difference at the same time as fitting into another culture.

In this connection, it is important to remain vigilant as regards the problems of second-generation migrants (that is to say, those born in the host country), with special reference to the difficulties of adolescents. No serious observers doubt that it is in this age group (13-18) that the most serious and most alarming difficulties arise. For a long time, the predominant problem area was primary education - but a shift has now occurred.

7. Design and production of teaching/learning instruments

This is always necessary for language teaching, but the shortage is much greater in the case of migrants than for other groups of learners. There is urgent work to be done here, complying with three main principles: materials must be practical and capable of being put to immediate use, they must be learner-centred, they must be rigorously suited to each group of learners (which means that the first requirement is not to succumb to the mystifying temptation of uniform, universal material which is supposedly suitable for everyone, everywhere and at any time).

8. Co-ordination and co-operation

This is perhaps the most profound and at the same time the most delicate recommendation. It is essential to pool efforts because a great many factors, of various origins, are involved in the teaching of languages to migrants, bearing in mind, firstly, that the problems to be faced are by no means only linguistic (and hence can by no means be solved purely linguistically, though they must be so solved) and, secondly, that learners themselves must be involved in working out the necessary strategies. Accordingly, inside the organisations dealing with these difficulties, co-ordination machinery has to be devised, maintained and developed. If such machinery is not set up, for obscure or all too evident reasons, then nothing will be produced but hot air.

Conclusions

As always, it is at the meeting point between theory and practice, between thought and action, at the interface between the concrete and the abstract that the effectiveness of future work will be decided. If we allow ourselves to be carried away by intemperate theorising, we shall mark time and the only ones to benefit will be those who pay themselves handsomely in words at the expense of the intended beneficiaries. Conversely, concentrating exclusively on the practical, as if it could exist on its own, and as if men were robots, would be as short-sighted, as are those whom it pays not to see, those who in the name of efficiency elevate their prejudice to the status of canons before which the masses are expected to bow down, briefly the dogmatists.